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AUTHOR Santa Rita, Emilio; Misick, Jennifer
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ABSTRACT

Based on the assumption that the acquisition of language habits is in itself insufficient for the true mastery of language, small group discussion techniques have been used in conversation workshops for students in English as a second language (ESL) courses at New York's Bronx Community College. In the groups, students are induced to communicate with others by employing newly learned grammatical structures. One of the exercises used in the ESL groups presents students with a problem and possible courses of action. The students are divided into "buzz groups," or goal-directed discussion groups of no more than six students, with the task of arriving at a consensus regarding the solution, selecting a spokesman, and formulating a rationale for the group's decision. In attempting to convince other members of their group, students are forced to participate, construct persuasive explanations for their position, and make themselves understood in English. Another exercise also involves the use of "buzz groups" to arrive at a consensus regarding a survival scenario. These exercises are effective in increasing students' ability to express themselves and employ free conversation, while the use of "buzz groups" can be particularly helpful in oversized classes to allow all students the opportunity to participate. Contains five references. (TGI)

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E. Santa Rita

J. Misick

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Emilio Santa Rita and Jennifer Misick
Bronx Community College of the City of New York
181 West & University Avenue
Bronx, NY 10453

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AN ADAPTATION OF GROUP DYNAMICS TECHNIQUES

TO CONVERSATION WORKSHOPS FOR ESL STUDENTS

The assumption behind the teaching experiments to be described below is that the acquisition of language habits is in itself insufficient for the true mastery of a language. A methodology must be developed which will induce the student to communicate with others by employing his or her newly learned set of structures. The ability to use a language can only be acquired by the act of using the language.

The above assumption does not reflect a revision of good ESL practice so much as it does a suggest some rethinking of ESL theory. Teachers have always felt the need to supplement drills by means of games, question and answer, and "free conversation." However, there is often a feeling on the part of ESL teachers that time spent on these activities is somehow illegitimate; that this time might better be spent on drilling structure by means of pattern practice. Often the structural aspects of the program are mandatory in the curriculum, while conversation (or, better, communication) activities are left up to the judgment of the individual teacher. To a certain extent this is valid, of course, since realistic communication cannot be forced but must arise naturally from the immediate situation. However, the lack of emphasis upon conversation also reflects a general downgrading of the importance of this sort of activity in comparison to that of pattern practice.

In fact, learning a language seems to involve at least two separate processes. First, in order to communicate in a language one must approximate the phonetic, morphological, and syntactic patterns of the language (Krashen, 1987). The approximation arrived at by the learner

may be quite far removed from the speech of a native speaker of the language and still may be quite adequate for oral communication, however.

Second, there seems to be something other than accuracy of patterns which allows a speaker to make himself or herself understood. The phenomenon of "false fluency" attests to the possibility of communication despite non-native structural patterns. In this instance, it would appear that the sine qua non for the development of fluency is the will to communicate (Hirsch, 1988). As used here, "communicate" means not merely to speak but to say something. It is not a formal activity which can be practiced in drills such as pattern practice, but rather is a contentive action which grows out of the immediate needs of the speaker. In order to make communication an intrinsic part of an ESL program, we must find a way to bring conversation into ESL teaching practices. Ability to make 'well-formed sentences' is one thing; ability to use these, and perhaps sentences less well-formed, for communication is another thing. Repeatedly successful communication contributes to effective learning, since success of this kind is likely to impress the learner with what the language can do and what he or she can do with it (Campbell & Webb, 1987).

As was mentioned above, certain traditional language-teaching exercises promote fluency in communication. Various types of question-and-answer drills (especially the less structured varieties) are of great value. Question and answer is not enough, however. What is needed is a consciously applied methodology for the fostering of communication. Games and free conversation could then be used purposively, rather than in the current haphazard manner.

Such a methodology does in fact exist, although it apparently has not been applied to the teaching of ESL. This methodology is that of laboratory training, developed principally for use in sensitivity groups by students of small group dynamics. It would not be appropriate to discuss the theoretical basis of group dynamics here. For present purposes, it is sufficient to note that laboratory training groups have the goal of developing mechanisms for human communication and collaboration. The traditional T-group (laboratory training group) consists of a small number of individuals, usually ten to sixteen, whose objectives in meeting are to help each other become aware why they behave as they do in groups. That is to say, their aim is to improve their human relations skills (Slavson, 1979).

Obviously, many aspects of sensitivity training are to be avoided in these conversation workshops. What the authors are suggesting here is an adaptation of selected aspects which are valuable for the development of skills in communication.

Communication requires participation. One of the difficulties with "free conversation" as a teaching technique is that often only a minority of the students is actively speaking or listening. Alternately, a student may think he or she is listening but may not really understand what the other student is saying. This can be demonstrated by requiring a listener to summarize what the speaker has said. Lack of true listening often is the result of two aspects of the social situation: the number of participants and the desire of the students to speak but not to hear.

This is often unavoidable, even with groups as small as ten students. It may make conversation such a demoralizing experience that the teacher

learns to avoid it and to substitute drill for conversation.

The following series of exercises, based on group dynamics, did not seem to suffer from the defects just mentioned. In the first exercise the students are presented with a problem. Each student is to envision himself/herself as an instructor at a college. There has been a rash of cheating recently, and the board of trustees has decided that any student caught cheating will be expelled. Most students and teachers support this policy.

While he or she is administering a final examination to a large class, the instructor discovers a student copying from notes on a paper concealed in his hand. The student is a friend of the instructor's. He is the editor of the student newspaper, a good student whose grades have fallen drastically because of the pressure of extracurricular activities. He had no time to study for this test, although he must receive an 'A' to get into law school in the fall. If he succeeds in getting into law school, his teachers believe he will have a brilliant career as a lawyer.

The students are limited to five courses of action they might take in the role of instructor: 1) ignore the cheating student, pretending not to have seen him; 2) quietly ask him to stop cheating; 3) take his notes away and announce to the class that someone has been cheating and say that if it happens again the next case will result in expulsion; 4) remove the student from the test and explain to the class the reason for doing so; 5) all of #4 above and also report the student to the president, which will mean expulsion from the university.

After the problem is explained, a secret ballot is held. The results are not revealed until later.

The group (in this case twelve students) is then divided into buzz groups (goal directed discussion groups, usually of no more than six members) of three students each. The task of the groups is to arrive at a consensus regarding the solution, select a spokesman, and formulate a rationale for the group's decision. This rationale is later presented by the spokesman to the class as a whole. Finally another secret ballot is taken and the results of all the ballots are disclosed and discussed.

The process of arriving at a consensus in all four groups took over an hour. A shorter time could have been imposed, however. During this period all the students were actively participating. They were forced to make themselves understood in English. Obviously, much of what was said consisted of ungrammatical utterances. In effect, the students created a pidgin language when they could not use the appropriate English structures. (An example is given later in this article). However, when their English deviated too far from the grammatical norm, it was rejected by the group, and the speaker had to find some more comprehensible way of expressing his or her ideas.

The process of arriving at a consensus was quite successful. Most groups were initially divided between the second solution (telling the cheater quietly to stop cheating) and the third (telling him to stop cheating and warning the class of the consequences of further cheating). One student was in favor of dismissing the cheater from the examination (the fourth solution). In attempting to convince the other members of his or her group that his or her solution was most appropriate, each student was forced to construct a persuasive explanation of his or her position. Some of the factors considered were the need to save face, pressure on the

instructor from the administration, the importance of providing a warning to the other students, the moral issue, and the relation of morality to practice in light of the problem presented. These individual explanations were later combined by the group into a statement of position to be presented by the spokesman to the class as a whole. Thus the members of the groups needed not only to express their opinions but to develop these opinions clearly and logically. This was done despite difficulties in finding the appropriate grammatical expression for their ideas.

What is of interest here is the participation pattern of the buzz group. In most classroom activities there is a two-way participation pattern: i.e. the teacher speaks to the members of the class and they respond. Often this degenerates into one-way participation - only the teacher participates, without student response. In the buzz group the pattern is multidirectional; all members speak to one another or to the group as a whole.

The success of this exercise seems to be a result of 1) the inherent interest of the topic for most students and 2) the structure of the problem, which permits and indeed demands active participation in the communication process.

The second exercise used parallels the previous one in that it involves the use of buzz groups to arrive at a consensus (Pfeiffer & Jones, 1969). The students were asked to imagine that they are members of a space crew which has crash landed on the surface of the moon 200 miles from where they were to have met the mother ship. The students are presented with a list of fifteen items left intact after the crash (water, matches, oxygen, food concentrate, etc.). Their task is to rank the items

in order of their importance for survival. The items are first ranked by each student individually. Then buzz groups are formed and an attempt at consensus is made. Discussion in the buzz groups is governed by the following operational rules: 1) avoid arguing merely to support your previous judgment if it is not logical; 2) avoid agreement for the sake of agreement: do not acquiesce in a particular ranking unless it is at least somewhat acceptable to you; 3) use no techniques like voting or trading to reduce conflict: true consensus is required; 4) differences in opinion are considered useful because they help reveal the correct solution.

The response of the conversation group was again enthusiastic. A definite increase in the ability of the students to express themselves was evident. What was also notable throughout the series of exercises was a growing tendency on the part of the students to employ in free conversation the structures learned by drill. This took place without conscious effort on the students' part. The level of participation was high, and even the weakest students made themselves understood. The situation predicated by Martinet for the occurrence of communication had taken place; cooperation within the group was a pressing necessity.

The same pattern was employed on two other occasions during a conversation session. The following is a sample of dialogue in an exercise in which one student presents a personal problem and the two other members of his buzz group try to help him find a solution to his problem. Raul will have to work in order to help pay his expenses while he is studying in the United States. He is having difficulty reconciling himself to this necessity. Julio is discussing Raul's problem with him.

Julio: It's better, you know, if you're going to independence, if you're going to stay out of your parents. You have to learn how to earn your own money. That means if you can earn enough money for yourself, you know for getting an education, for living expenses, board, everything, you're going to get troubles. That's right. Everybody gets troubles.

Raul: I have friends, some people I have served [observed]. They are graduate students now and they are depending on their parents. They are still depending on their parents.

Julio: They are working.

Raul: Yeah. No, no perhaps they are not working. They are still studying here and they are, their parents send them the money. And they are now graduates. They act like little babies. I, I can say that because all their life their parents have been been supporting them and everything they need they wrote a letter to my father, to her, to their father, and said that they needed money. So I think that will be very helpful for me, especially for my background, as I told you before, was kind of everything I wanted I have. That will be good. But I really have to convince myself in very interior part that I have to work. I don't know. That's my trouble.

Julio: I think the only thing that you can convince yourself: try, try.

Raul: Yeah, I think that when I start probably I will.

Julio: Yeah, you're going to convince yourself.

The results of this exercise were essentially similar to those of the previous exercises. The students' attention was on what they wished to say, not how they wished to say it. Neither Raul nor Julio had gained full control of the structures they were using. It should be noted that some of the errors were errors of performance rather than competence. In discussing the graduate students who are still supported by their parents, Raul says, "Everything they need, they wrote a letter to my father, to her, to their father, and said that they needed money" [italics authors']. Raul knows which possessive he needs to use. His difficulty is in carrying out what he knows. Many of the performance errors in a student's speech can best be corrected by giving the student the opportunity to bridge the gap between competence and performance. What is needed here is not pattern practice but rather communication practice.

Slavson (1979) notes the following characterizations of the small group discussion: "It permits maximum interaction and interstimulation between members...It can place responsibility on all members to participate and to be prepared with facts and ideas...It can teach members to think as a group and develop a sense of equality...By it all members are encouraged to listen carefully, to reason, to reflect, to participate and to contribute" (pp. 181-182).

The use of buzz groups is especially helpful in oversized groups to permit participation in communication activities by all members of the group simultaneously If an eventual consensus is desired, the "fisbbowl" technique may be used. Each group nominates a spokesman. The spokesman of all the buzz groups meet in a circle in the center of the room and attempt to arrive at a consensus. If any member of a buzz group wants to

replace the group representative, he or she taps him or her on the shoulder and takes his or her place. There is one chair left empty in the circle for any member of the group who wishes to join the circle temporarily.

What is suggested in this paper is not the employment of a few tricks from the bag of the laboratory trainer. Rather, the parallel aims of some laboratory groups and of ESL classes are noted. The common aim of enhancing communication leads to an overlapping methodology. In particular, the employment of goal-directed buzz groups seem applicable to ESL teaching.

The question arises of at what point in language learning communication exercises should be introduced. We believe that communication skills of some type must be developed from the very earliest of language learning. In the earliest stages, these skills might best be fostered by semistructured question-and-answer drills (i.e., where the answer to the question is not a direct outcome of the structure being practiced) or by language game. In answering semistructured questions, the student is required to tell the truth in his or her answers. If the questions themselves are realistic, this technique serves as bridge between drill and unstructured activities.

Small group discussion techniques have been used in the conversation workshops for students in ESL01 at Bronx Community College. The students described in this paper were all between their ESL01 and ESL02 sequence. The particular topics used in this experiment were probably more effective on an advanced level (ESL11) than they would have been on an intermediate

level. It is our opinion that the general principles outlined above are also applicable to intermediate learners of English, however, and might be adapted to beginners.

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